The future of government communication
How can governments better connect with their citizens in today’s increasingly polarised world?

Key findings from the first global study into government communication
Welcome to The Leaders’ Report: the future of government communication. At the heart of this research lies the simple recognition that public policy cannot be delivered successfully without effective communication.

Yet communication leaders in many governments who were interviewed for this research say they are struggling to combat declining levels of public trust in government, and that they lack the ability to keep pace with how citizens communicate and engage in the 21st century.

Introduction

About This Research

Spanning 40 countries, The Leaders’ Report is the first comprehensive global review into how government and public sector communication leaders and practitioners are working now, their concerns, and what they are doing to prepare for the communication challenges of the future.

The research has allowed us to identify what may be driving these challenges, and how government can respond. The report includes practical examples from a range of countries that show how government communicators are responding to the rising expectations of politicians, policymakers and the public alike.

The Leaders’ Report is structured in three parts:

- **The challenges** sets out three key issues: the striking similarities in the challenges faced across geographic and social-political boundaries; an explanation of why effective communication is crucial; and the importance of sharing best practice

- **The findings** delves deeper into five key challenges facing government communicators globally, and begins to identify what might be done to address them

- **Outliers** introduces questions cited by a minority of participants in this research and which we believe warrant further study

Background to the Leaders’ Report

The Leaders’ Report was developed by WPP’s Government & Public Sector Practice. The programme was chaired by the Practice’s CEO, Dr Michelle Harrison. It was steered by an advisory board of global leaders in the fields of government, politics and communication to whom we are indebted for their input:

- Vijay Chadda, CEO of the Bharti Foundation, the development arm of Bharti Enterprises, one of India’s leading business groups

- Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore

- Dr Juan Pardinas, General Director of the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO)
Methodology
The research included:
- A comprehensive audit of existing practice together with analysis of data on major trends in government communication and their associated organisational drivers
- A global conversation with the project’s advisory board members
- In-depth qualitative interviews with government communications leaders from 20 countries and five multilateral organisations
- An online, confidential qualitative survey with more than 240 communication practitioners from 29 countries

About us
Governments today cannot achieve their public policy goals without effective communications.

WPP is the leading global marketing and communications services company. It’s agencies partner with governments in over 70 countries on the policy challenges where communication can have the greatest impact:
- Behaviour Change
- Digital Government
- Place Marketing
- Engagement & Participation
- Public Sector Recruitment

Contact us to discuss a strategic communication challenge, improving the performance of a public sector communication team, or finding the right team within WPP’s agencies for a specific brief.
Challenges

Purpose of government communication
Respondents to The Leaders’ Report identify three differing purposes for government communication functions. Some use it to protect open, political discourse and dialogue. Some use it as a tool to help deliver government policy. Some countries use government communication to support politicians and their political position.

Regardless of the purpose, the majority of respondents focus on protecting and enhancing their government’s reputation. Around a third engage and consult with citizens.

Communication expenditure
While there is clarity of purpose in most government communication teams, it is harder to identify clarity around budgets and spend:

- Some countries do not define what ‘communication’ is, making direct comparisons on spend unhelpful
- Some government communication functions control spend, some monitor spend, and some have no control over spend. Many senior communication leaders do not have access to accurate figures on communication budgets
- Some communication spend is held within policy and programme budgets. Spending decisions may be made by policymakers rather than communicators

However, available information on trends in government media expenditure in a range of countries in Europe, North America, South Asia and Australasia show that:

- The average spend on communication per head per annum by the governments studied varies widely and there is little consistency in approach to budgeting or spending
- According to respondents, the majority of government communication spend remains focused on traditional channels, with spend on newspapers, radio and television accounting for between 74% and 97% of media spend

- Unsurprisingly, spend on print tends to decrease as spend on digital increases
- Spend on government communication tends to fall when countries introduce centralised systems for monitoring and co-ordinating communication spending, and when budget is directly linked to evaluation models
**Overarching context**

Despite wide differences in purpose and spend, The Leaders’ Report identifies a high degree of commonality in the context of communication leaders across continents and governance models say they are working in – even if the factors leading to them vary from country to country. Their overarching belief is that:

- There has never been a more challenging time for government communication
- Communication is poorly understood and under-utilised within government
- Sharing of best practice and expertise across countries is largely absent

Participants acknowledge that governments – and by direct implication government communicators – face almost unprecedented difficulties. They define these as:

- A significant decline in trust in government
- The advent and constant development of digital technologies
- Shifting and complex demographics

These factors are seen as substantial barriers to the impact and effectiveness of government communication. They are also seen as interconnected. Senior communication leaders acknowledge that:

- The internet has loosened governments’ historical and collective ‘grip’ on trust. It has transformed the role that governments previously had as providers of information
- Social media has created an echo chamber of information that can filter out opposing views and commentary. It has created a sense that all information is ‘free’ and equal
- Citizens find it increasingly easy to communicate with each other, helping once-marginalised groups create vocal and powerful social organisations
- While technology has offered governments many more channels through which to engage with those they govern, that same technology has fractured audiences. It is enabling misinformation to be corroborated by anonymous users and politicians alike, and at ever increasing speeds
An overlooked asset

The research identifies that government communication is overlooked and underused as a strategic tool for policy delivery. The majority of communication leaders believe their profession is:

- Regarded as a ‘shared service’ function
- Poorly integrated into wider government structures
- Tasked with information dissemination, rather than supporting policy development, service delivery, and citizen engagement
- Primarily tactical and reactive
- Too often excluded from discussions around policy development

Some respondents also report that their function is actively marginalised and increasingly bypassed by politicians. This should be a cause for serious concern. Alongside control, incentives and design, influence (through communication) is one of government’s four most powerful levers of policy delivery. Yet our research shows that it is not fulfilling its potential.

"Some policy colleagues refer to communication as ‘the car wash’. The analysts and economists that drive and draft the budget text are doing the important work. Then at the end of the day, they send us their product and it goes through the car wash. We’ll give it a polish and package it up but, you know, not much more than that. There's still a perception... that communication is a tail-end process and that government can probably do without it."

- Communication Leader, North America

Underinvestment in capability

While 57% of our respondents are educated to Masters level or higher, our research suggests that many may be poorly equipped for the challenges that face them. More than a third receive fewer than two days communication training each year. Indeed 14% of respondents receive no communication training at all.

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Why Communication Matters

The principle role of government, on behalf of citizens, is to make policies that help society progress. As such, government communication must enable the exchange of views, wants and needs. The more effort a government puts into communication, the more it clarifies its purpose. And the clearer its purpose, the more effective it is likely to be.

While communication is no replacement for poor policy, it does have a profound impact on its development and delivery. This is in part due to the relationship between policy delivery and trust, and the relationship between trust and communication. A high level of trust in government:

- Influences positive behaviours, such as eating healthily
- Encourages consumption, vital in an era of slow growth and financial uncertainty
- Leads to a faster response from citizens in a time of crisis or danger.

Respondents to this research echo findings from the World Economic Forum that suggest a lack of proper communication is also influencing an increasing movement towards populism, radicalisation and extremism. When people feel ignored, unheard and unrepresented, they turn to alternative sources of information. If governments do not communicate with citizens properly, citizens will simply go elsewhere for information.

Government communication is focused on informing, advocating/persuading, and engaging citizens. The ability to “push out” information is necessary, albeit deeply insufficient. The willingness and ability to speak with citizens must be coupled with a willingness and ability to listen to them, incorporate their needs and preferences into the policy process, and engage local patterns of influence and trusted sources of information.

Communication Leader, Multilateral Organisation

The rise of populism is important to note, and not without irony. Respondents acknowledge that citizens are perhaps more powerful now than ever before: they have almost unlimited access to information. They can broadcast their opinions widely (regardless of accuracy). They can garner support on issues from likeminded individuals faster than the speed at which even the nimblest administration can respond. They have more up-to-date tech than most governments.

But at the same time, our respondents suggest that societies have entered an age of insecurity. Just as citizens have become more powerful, they have also become more fearful. Respondents to The Leaders’ Report believe that the public feels more apprehensive today than perhaps at any time since the end of the Cold War. The global financial crisis, the danger of terrorism, the fear of immigration and perceived erosion of national identity, the threat of unemployment and insecure employment, the escalating costs of housing have, in many countries, served only to highlight the limits of democratic governments in meeting rising public expectations – and the potential attraction of populist politicians offering simplistic solutions.

So, how and why governments need to communicate has changed – but communication structures and skills have not. Governments need to recognise the limitations of carrying on communicating as many do today – broadcasting too many issues at the public with insufficient thought given to overarching priority, strategy and targeting.
A note of caution
Throughout The Leaders’ Report we emphasise the importance of governments listening and responding. However, our research has highlighted two important caveats.

First, respondents believe that government relationships with the media have become more combative as the size of traditional media has shrunk and the fight for audiences has become more competitive. That increases the importance of governments finding active voices in civil society to help disseminate their message.

Second, the growth of social media has led to what some respondents termed “the shrinking of the centre”. Groups can establish themselves effectively in opposition to government with very few resources. Such groups don’t require the kind of checks and balances that governments need to go through before they can respond. Extreme views can appear more mainstream when algorithms amplify them and reflect them back to others with similar views.

So as well as identifying who to communicate with, government communicators must also identify who to listen and respond to: governments must consider carefully how they respond to loud, but not necessarily representative, opinions.

The bar for what constitutes a story has been lowered and journalists working in the media don’t have the experience and skills to make the kind of judgement calls they used to. Most stories are framed as a conflict between right and wrong or good and bad. The issues we communicate are rarely this black and white.”

– Communication Leader, Australasia

One can hold a minority opinion that will be seen to represent the majority because of the strong engagement and powerful occupation of the [online] space. It’s like an interactive video game: because I am the hero, I decide what the story is.”

– Communication Leader, Western Europe
Alongside the shared nature of the challenges faced by government communicators and the need for government communication to be used more strategically, a third commonality emerged from the research: an almost universal lack of conversation between communicators, yet a global thirst for more knowledge sharing and best practice.

The lack of sharing arises from a variety of factors:

- For some, a perceived “dictatorship of urgency” means there is simply no time to spend on anything other than the day job

- Other participants believe that local distinctions make their circumstances unique, rendering the idea of shared best practice obsolete

However, the majority of respondents express a desire for a more global perspective and global forum which is at present lacking.

Communication isn’t easy. It is an art and a science that requires logic, discipline, sophisticated tools and, fortunately, is something that can be learned. It can be learned but this has to be done with methods, with discipline, and you need to learn from experts, from their knowledge and from their ideas to be able to communicate properly.”

– Communication Leader, South America

This final commonality serves to reinforce the motivation for producing The Leaders’ Report: to provide a global overview of government communication and to act as a gateway for more shared, accessible conversations about where government communication is today and where it needs to be tomorrow.

We hope this report will support the contribution communication needs to play in helping governments deliver their policy priorities and, ultimately, contribute to improving the public realm.

We return now to the five key issues that government communicators worldwide say they are facing.

One to watch: network with networks

The European Union’s Club of Venice is an informal group of Europe’s most senior and experienced government communications professionals. Founded in 1986, it meets several times each year to provide members with an opportunity to discuss issues of mutual interest, share experiences and best practice, and offer mutual support.

For more information, see: https://clubofvenice.wordpress.com
Communication is a key lever of policy delivery but communication leaders who took part in The Leaders’ Report are frustrated that it is misunderstood and underused, and that it rarely fulfils its potential.

This section of the research looks at why respondents believe this to be the case. It also suggests what could be done to increase the impact that communication can have on policy delivery. In doing so, we have drawn heavily on qualitative and quantitative research, and our audit of existing best and emerging practice.

Many of the obstacles faced are shared by government communicators around the world. However, there is significant variation between countries, regions and political systems, and the benefits of a global overview must be qualified: there is no one-size-fits-all solution that will improve the impact of government communication. We recognise the need for local adaptation and specificity. What follows, therefore, is a pragmatic starting point that warrants more localised study, trialling and testing.

Findings

Five Global Challenges
Our research identified five challenges that government communicators worldwide are facing. They are:

1. Trust
   The long road to re-connecting
   [Click here]

2. Audiences
   Turn down the megaphone. Dial up the data
   [Click here]

3. Conversation
   Shifting from communication to consultation
   [Click here]

4. Capability
   Moving beyond ability
   [Click here]

5. Influence
   Like respect, you don’t just get it: you earn it
   [Click here]
While technology is fundamentally changing how governments and citizens communicate and engage, these challenges relate to fundamental basics of human communication. Our task is to relearn these fundamentals and ensure they are delivered in a way that is applicable to the 21st century.

The research enabled us to develop three common typologies to classify the performance of most government communication functions. The typologies are:

- **Marginalised megaphone.** These teams face serious challenges across all five areas. Broadcast remains the primary form of communication and team skills and structures reflect this. Influence with key decision makers is distant.

- **Mind, but not matter.** Most countries covered in The Leaders’ Report fall into this category. Communication leaders realise the need for a marked shift in how they communicate, but struggle to make the necessary improvements in their function.

- **Crossing the last frontier.** A small minority of participants demonstrate best practice across most of the key areas of activity. Complete integration as a fourth lever of government is not complete as they lack sufficient authority, influence and resources to fulfil their potential.

While some teams may sit exclusively within a single typology, others may sit across more than one due to discrepancy of performance across these five areas.
Trust

The long road to re-connecting

Government relies on the consent and trust of the people: the more government is trusted, the more it can do. Unsurprising then, falling levels of trust in government is cited by government leaders who took part in this research as the key issue facing government communicators. They believe a lack of trust is:

- Limiting cut-through of government messages
- Inhibiting two-way dialogue
- Contributing to detachment and disengagement from government
- Inhibiting the success of policies that depend on behavioural responses from the public

Respondents to The Leaders’ Report share a global sense that trust in government has declined dramatically. However, very few have metrics or measures that prove it - and without measurement it is difficult to address. Their sense that trust has fallen concurs with extensive research carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which concludes that a lack of trust is compromising the willingness of citizens and business to respond to public policies and contribute to a sustainable economic recovery. Worldwide, only 40% of citizens trust their government. Even in countries with the highest levels of public trust - such as the United Arab Emirates and Singapore - as many as one citizen in four professes to distrust their government.

The reasons cited by respondents for the decline in trust vary:

- Some see it as a predictable result of the shift from an “age of deference” to an “age of reference”, which has been accelerated by the internet and social media
- Others trace a trajectory or linear series of events leading from Watergate through 9/11 to the rise of Donald Trump as a politician
- Some cite it as the result of the cumulative impact that more isolated events such as the global financial crisis, WikiLeaks and the Panama Papers have had on public discourse
- Others believe that the internet has enabled the exponential growth and circulation of conspiracy theories, creating a general distrust of those in positions of authority and the information that supports them.

The majority of communication leaders who took part in the research describe a pattern of “disconnection and dishonesty” between politicians and the public that is culminating in an era perhaps best labelled as

- Post-truth: the rise of a political culture in which debate is framed largely by appeals to emotion disconnected from the details of policy, and by the repeated assertion of talking points to which factual rebuttals are ignored
- Post-democratic: the entrenchment of a small elite within democratic countries that is taking decisions by co-opting democratic institutions
- Post-post democratic: the move towards citizens increasingly forming their own organised and unorganised social movements, often online, as a response to widespread alienation from established political frameworks.
The potential driver of this “disconnection” is illustrated in our data: respondents report low levels of citizen-centricity and understanding. Only 40% of respondents describe their colleagues as “citizen focused”. Only 26% agree that the voice of the citizen is taken into account in key decisions. Such low levels of citizen focus translate into communication that feels ill tuned to the public’s needs, re-enforcing the sense of distrust and detachment.

"The Churchillian culture of telling the truth is now in the minority in Europe.”
– Communication Academic, Western Europe

"The times are crying out for genuine, inspired, honest leadership: governments absolutely need to be braver and much more honest.”
– Communication Leader, Multilateral Organisation

Respondents also cite confusion between what is political communication and what is public communication as a cause of declining levels of trust. As formerly clear boundaries are blurred, many respondents believe citizens are losing clarity between what is partisan and what is non-partisan. The result is that a significant proportion of communication from government is viewed through a prism of electoral motivations rather than public service motivations. Respondents believe this is increasing public cynicism and disengagement.

“We face a serious problem of signal extraction: the public are unable to distinguish between public and political communications.”
– Communication Leader, South Asia

Communication leaders also see the issue of falling trust as the result of rising incomes and rising expectations, something we have termed Amazon Syndrome: citizens can now access what they want, whenever they want it, a standard of personalisation and customer service that current models of government service are unable to match.
What can be done?
We believe that rebuilding a positive and trusting relationship with citizens is critical for effective governance. And while communication alone will not resolve the problem of declining trust in government, it can play an important role.

There is no single model to reverse or halt the decline in trust that has occurred over recent decades. Significant regional differences exist in the root causes of distrust. Very few responses have wide-spread application. However, there is broad agreement from respondents that rebuilding trust will require greater:

- **Openness**: improving real-time access to government and those who govern
- **Inclusiveness**: involving citizens, listening to and acknowledging their concerns, even where governments are unable to act on those concerns
- **Responsiveness**: improving the quality of and access to public services
- **Reliability**: delivering commitments and getting the “hygiene factors” right (if citizens can’t trust their government with basic tasks such as public safety, they’re unlikely to task it with more complicated tasks such as data security and pensions management)

Generally, improving responsiveness and reliability lies outside the remit of communication functions. But government communicators have a legitimate responsibility to advise policymakers and politicians on how best to assure citizens that their needs and desires are being taken into account and, where this is not possible, to provide advice on how best to minimise any backlash. Frustratingly, few communication leaders are positioned to provide advice on such matters.

Tools and approaches that can help
We offer a range of classic and innovative research, data and analytics services that help governments and public bodies understand how they are perceived and connect better with citizens. These include:

- Reputational models, reputation tracking and argument testing
- Public opinion tracking and election research
- Public policy research
- Large-scale deliberative engagement techniques
- Tracking and longitudinal cohort studies
- Sophisticated media and social media monitoring and analytics
- Real-time dashboards

One to watch: reputation models
A range of models exist that help governments understand how they are perceived. However, many of the measures they use are one dimensional, focusing on a single facet of reputation (for example, only trust or only performance). They give an indication of the what, but say little about the why.

Colmar Brunton’s Public Sector Reputation Index in New Zealand:

- Assesses a wide range of reputation attributes: service delivery; financial responsibility; innovation; management and leadership; governance; employee commitment; social and environmental impact; and communications
- Groups them under four pillars: leadership and success; fairness; social responsibility; and trust
- Weights each against its potential to improve advocacy. This enables governments to benchmark their performance and prioritise areas for improvement
THE LEADERS’ REPORT
Audiences
Government communicators face a unique challenge:

- They have both a moral and legal responsibility to engage with the entire population.

Participants in The Leaders’ Report say that:

- Government communication is still primarily broadcast, despite acknowledging that the most impactful communication is personalised.
- A lack of expertise in analysing audience data may be a contributory factor in this.

The majority of those who took part in the research say that their organisation relies heavily on a broadcast model of communication: in some cases, respondents said up to 90% of government communication is still broad-brush and aimed at a generic “general audience”.

This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, effective communication relies on both transmission and dissemination in order to minimise inaccuracy, miss-telling and rumour. Secondly, the world is comprised of increasingly heterogeneous populations: today’s extreme urbanisation, labour migration, and conflict migration is rapidly intensifying the intersection of diverse groups with diverse communication needs.³

“"There is a heightened individualisation and we can no longer send a uniform message to the entire public. It’s not possible. It doesn’t work anymore.”" - Communication Leader, Western Europe

“"It’s now more difficult to communicate to a generalised public”" - Communication Leader, Eastern Europe

Divergent groups have distinct needs and a single message is unlikely to resonate with them all. Similarly, fragmentation of the media landscape renders blanket communication unfeasible. While communication leaders acknowledge a shifting emphasis away from television and radio, effective citizen engagement within the new media landscape remains difficult territory for many:

- Half of respondents rank a lack of capacity (not enough people) as the greatest challenge they face in connecting with citizens.
- Half rank a lack of capability (not enough of the right skills) as the greatest challenge.

“"Government belongs to the people but at the moment we only communicate with 30-35% of the people.”" - Communication Leader, Western Europe
Government communication needs to break through. ‘Spray everywhere’ is just not possible in the current media and content environment. [We need to] share and disseminate information in a new and clever way because people are very time poor and there is a danger than any communication – both ways – gets drowned out.”

– Communication Leader, Multilateral Organisation

Respondents report that they find it extremely difficult – and in some instances impossible – to access in an easy and secure way information and data on citizens that their own governments hold. This undermines efforts to segment and address audiences. Indeed, a number of respondents said their country’s data protection laws actively prevent the sharing of citizen data across government ministries. Such laws are, in part, a response to falling levels of trust and rising concerns around data privacy.

What can be done?
Governments can no longer rely on mass broadcasting to engage with the public effectively. Citizens – rather than governments – should be placed at the heart of the communication process and be engaged with on more personalised terms.

To better understand citizens, governments need to look at how best to access, integrate and link different data sources so that communication functions can identify key insights to steer both audience segmentation and engagement.

Government communicators are starting to realise this. Over half of respondents to The Leaders’ Report demonstrate an awareness of the need to use data when understanding citizens: 53% cite data as the most important opportunity for communication professionals. However, less than a third believe they use fact-driven citizen insight when making key decisions. The ability to use data has to catch-up with the understanding of its importance.

Ninety percent of digital data in the world today was created within the past two years. While difficult to visualise, this data bank has the potential to provide governments with powerful tools for understanding and dividing audiences. However, while the majority of governments are data rich, our research suggests they are also insight poor. Segmentation by geography, income bracket or religion appears increasingly basic and crude when compared to the sophisticated data-driven portraits of audience groups increasingly produced by successful private-sector organisations and political parties.
Using data to understand audiences is critical for targeting and personalising in more efficient ways. It allows governments to know their audience to the point of predictability. The potential for this is perhaps best evinced by a government communication leader who explained confidently:

"In my world, we’re getting to the point where we can identify individuals, for example, smokers, through their digital behaviour. That will completely transform campaigning strategies: when you can actually tell who somebody is in digital space, that will completely change the nature of what we do and how we do it and the efficiencies around doing it."

– Communication Leader, Western Europe

Better use of data can also improve efficiency by providing a more diagnostic reading of complexities, which in turn can help develop more meaningful policy. This will only be possible if governments:

– Reform how they gather, access and interpret data across government boundaries

– Place data-driven audience understanding at the heart of policy development and not just communication delivery

We call this data-driven approach integrated communication. Our model comprises five stages of integration, all underpinned by data and insights, and that together aim to increase:

– Effectiveness: integrated communication has a much greater chance of successfully influencing citizen behaviour, sustainably and at scale

– Efficiency: an integrated approach can eliminate duplication, reduce time wasted in coordination and enable economies of scale. It generates metrics which allow budget to be reallocated to improve efficiency iteratively over time

– Control: an integrated approach allows a greater degree of centralised ownership of a campaign’s strategy, messages, execution and results

"It’s a whole new ball game. It’s microtargeting. It’s no longer mass media. It’s no longer even narrowcasting. Use all the tools – Facebook and so on – but the final focus must be the individual citizen... based on information that is targeted at that one person."

– Communication Leader, South East Asia
Tools and approaches that can help
Our clients need advisers with the expertise to engage with a spectrum of often hard-to-reach audiences. Our work with governments worldwide includes:

- Audience analytics and optimisation
- Community mapping and audience segmentation strategies
- Concept and message testing
- Social media insight
- Training on integrated communication and behaviour change

One to watch: Connected Life
Kantar TNS’s Connected Life is an annual study of connectivity covering 70,000 people across 57 markets. The survey covers content media consumption, device infrastructure, digital activities, online and offline purchase habits, respondent profiles, brand engagement touchpoints, online customer service, drivers of eCommerce, a deep dive into social networks, and attitudes to and preference for online brand engagement.

For more information, see http://connectedlife.tnsglobal.com

For more information on the integrated model, see: http://www.wpp.com/govtpractice/reports/integrated-comms-behaviour-change/
THE LEADERS’ REPORT
Conversation
Conversation
Shifting from communication to consultation

Our research suggests that government communication is still primarily a linear, one-way connection with the public. Respondents indicate that government communication operates as a tool to disseminate information, not to consult or engage.

The reasons they cite for this vary and include:

- An over-reliance on mass-media platforms
- Skills and capabilities limited to media management
- Insufficient access to digital tools
- Political and organisational reluctance to engage with and respond to the public

We believe that government communication will fulfill its potential only when it purposefully creates dialogue with citizens. Many respondents to The Leaders’ Report suggest that government leaders do not believe consultation is a legitimate function of government communication. Many reported that politicians and senior policy advisors with whom they work regard dialogue and conversation as “ceding control to the masses” and inherently undesirable. While the majority of government communication leaders we interviewed disagree, only 14% of survey respondents say they have received any training in citizen engagement.

Government communication is focused on informing, advocating, persuading and engaging citizens. The ability to ‘push out’ information is necessary, albeit deeply insufficient. The willingness and ability to speak with citizens must be coupled with a willingness to listen to them, incorporate their needs and preferences into the policy process, and engage local patterns of influence and trusted sources of information.”

– Communication Leader, Multilateral Organisation

Acknowledgement of the need for dialogue is not universally lacking, however.
Try going home and never listening for six weeks: see where this gets you in your personal life.”

– Communication Academic, Australasia

While 60% of respondents report a skew towards purely one-way (organisation to public) flow of information, our data also reveals a directional shift toward more two-way engagement. Thirty six percent of high-performing communication functions believe they have a balanced two-way flow; 10% believe they are skewed towards the public.

Respondents were asked to identify the channels most commonly used to communicate with the public today, and those they thought would be most important in five years. Their answers reveal a clear anticipated shift towards channels that will allow for dialogue (social media and civil society partnerships, for example) in ways that newspapers, TV and radio cannot. A minority of communication leaders are successfully driving this shift to a more consultative role for
their profession. Yet they struggle to incorporate this change into considerations around budget, skills and objectives. Few have the time or the connections to access examples of private sector best practice.

Our research suggests a strong correlation between successful citizen engagement and successfully maintaining or restoring public trust. This is unlikely to be accidental.

“
The responsibility of explaining policies to citizens is at the heart of what we do. But you know, we’ve taken it a little bit further and we’re saying more and more that… it isn’t only about projecting government’s policy work into the public domain. It’s also about listening and trying to interact with citizens to understand how they can improve the policy making process itself.”
– Communication Leader, Africa

“
It’s a matter of staging oneself and engaging in dialogue and exchange with the public. So communication is at the core of the legitimacy and credibility of the democratic political system.”
– Communication Leader, Western Europe
What can be done?
There is no single way to engage with the public. What is clear from the research however, is that governments need to move towards a more participatory model of communication. Some respondents have experimented with deliberative inquiry techniques which set out to explore promising avenues for action, rather than aiming to solve a problem or resolve an issue. Others have used more formal programmes such as participatory budgeting where ordinary people decide how to allocate part of a municipal or public budget. Such models seek to help individuals feel connected to each other and to their communities, and can instil a sense of ownership, trust and connectivity.

To achieve the shift from communication to conversation, governments need to accept that communication is no longer a linear process. Two-way communication is a process of negotiation: both the sender and receiver listen to each other, gather information and must be willing to make changes to work together in agreement.

**We have really got to revisit the word ‘communication’. For some reason, in our society it has come to mean transmitting information and that is actually a model of communication that was developed in the era of propaganda in the 1920s... this is a very outdated and very narrow one-way concept. Most people and academics argue today that communication is reaction, it’s a transaction. It has to have speakers and listeners.”**

- Communication Leader, South East Asia
Our research indicates that governments routinely tell their citizens what they are doing and how, but less often why. Yet explaining why a course of action occurs can help minimise resistance from citizens: they still may dislike a policy or course of action (such as austerity) but may assent to it if they understand why it is necessary. Our research with government communication practitioners suggests that those governments which routinely include the what, the how and the why in their messaging are more successful at engaging with their citizens than those that don’t.

Successful inclusion of the why depends on proper dialogue with citizens. It is through conversation that governments are able to gauge the most salient issues and frame their why in terms that will most resonate with the public. This will engage citizens and demonstrate that public needs sit at the heart of government decisions and actions.

**Tools and approaches that can help**

We help governments and public sector bodies listen to, understand and formulate responses to public beliefs, concerns and needs through a range of services including:

- Behavioural research, frameworks and tools
- Small- and large-scale citizen engagement exercises such as participatory budgeting
- Deliberative public engagement in public policy
- Digital engagement
THE LEADERS’ REPORT

Capability
Capability
Moving beyond ability

Governments communicate in a fast-paced, fast-changing environment. Digital technologies and fragmented media have created entirely new dynamics between governments and those they govern. Yet while the demands placed on government communication have changed, their structures, processes and tools have not. The Leaders’ Report reveals a shared sense among many communication leaders that their teams lack the agility to perform well in this new world - and that constant cost reductions have “filleted” them of the staff, skills, financial resources and knowledge they need. As one respondent commented, “we know we’re missing a trick.”

We know we are missing a trick. We just don’t know what that trick is.”

Traditionally, government communication functions have focused on managing media coverage of their policies. Our research shows an increasing realisation that an effective government communication function must also:

- Interact with citizens directly on social media
- Produce high quality, rapid content
- Run long-term, strategic behaviour change communication campaigns
- Help citizens access digital public services across multiple touch points
- Integrate communications across on- and off-line channels
- Create direct channels to engage with the public, so that government can communicate with citizens without dependence on the ‘filter’ of the media

Respondents from both developed and developing economies acknowledge that citizens are constantly shifting to new communication channels and that they are increasingly skilled in navigating multiple platforms at once. Countering this calls for increasingly specialist skills, yet:

- Only half of respondents believe they have the right tools and resources to do their job
- Nearly one in five (19%) respondents was transferred into government communication from elsewhere in government and lacks any formal training in communication
- Fourteen percent of respondents receive no training in communication; 22% receive less than two days communication training each year
- Forty-three percent report being in post for more than 10 years; few have built up modern communication skills in that time.

There is little evidence that governments recognise the importance of communication or invest in it sufficiently. Few government communication functions, for example, appear to have any expertise in media planning – an increasingly vital tool. In many governments, the communication function and the marketing function are managed separately, making the co-ordination of integrated whole-of-government approaches difficult to introduce.
The expectations [of what we need to do] changed overnight but the skillsets in the communications departments didn’t. We’ve still got the same people so there is a capacity issue that’s going to need to be dealt with.”

– Communication Leader, North America

The research identifies a particular lack of capability in areas such as social media, data analysis, audience segmentation and citizen engagement. With nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents entering government communication from journalism, it is perhaps unsurprising that media management is the skill most highly valued. However, it is widely acknowledged by communication leaders that this needs to change.

One respondent explained that he needs three levels of sign off before publishing a tweet. Another complained that he is forced to hire generalist civil servants who lack both communication training and political experience: government policy prohibits him from hiring skilled practitioners from the private sector.

Our findings suggest that communication is insufficiently regarded within government as a profession. Many communication functions operate without:

- A clear definition of what communication is
- Defined processes and protocols
- Effective talent management and the ability to move staff fluidly between roles.

The proof of the absolute stupidity of [our] government is that there is no communications training. We must draw inspiration from the best techniques of the private sector.”

– Communication Leader, Western Europe

What can be done?

The importance of skills development for effective operation in the 21st century was clearly illustrated by The Leaders’ Report data. By looking at two key drivers in the quantitative responses relating to performance and outward orientation, we were able to identify both high performing and low performing communication functions. The area of capability and skills building provided the greatest area of deviation between the two groups:

- Seventy percent of high performers believe there is a strong focus on developing skills
- Twenty percent of low performers shared this belief.

That a transformation is needed is clear. However, transformation must go beyond building ability (the knowledge to change something), to also build capability (the power to change something).

Building capability is not just about training: it is also about empowerment. In October 2016, Harvard Business Review noted that too often learning on its own does not lead to better performance because staff revert to their former ways of doing things.9 Clearly, a more strategic approach is required.
I think there should be some sort of clear and unified structure for communication, some guidelines for all entities to consider communication as a strategic function... rather than a support function. Communication is not HR. It is not IT. It’s something that has an impact on society rather than the internal organisational environment.”

- Communication Leader, Middle East

We believe that building capability is as much about improving culture as it is about improving craft skills: focusing, as in the past, on individual skills and competencies (particularly around media management) is insufficient to build sustained organisational capabilities. Communications leaders should look at their:

- **Processes**: do clear and established practices ensure government communicators work in the same way? Do processes support efficiency, flexibility, agility and speed?

- **People**: do government communicators understand the competencies, behaviours, mindset and culture expected of them? Is team working encouraged? Are teams empowered?

- **Structures**: where does governance lie? Is decision making clear and visible? Are decisions made at the right time with the minimum acceptable oversight? Is collaboration and accountability incentivised?

- **Tools**: do teams have the right mix of hard and soft skills? Can they develop strategy, manage and leverage data, and deliver consistently? How well do they influence? Are they operating as trusted advisers to policymakers and politicians alike?

**Tools and approaches that can help**

We offer a range of tools to help build capability within government communication teams, and improve delivery of government policy. These include:

- Benchmarking teams against the attributes of success identified in this research
- Carrying out capability audits and performance reviews
- Developing training needs analyses and building competency frameworks
- Designing organisational structures and governance and process models for communication teams
- Creating and delivering training and executive education programmes
Influence
Like respect, you don’t just get it: you earn it

Our research suggests that the potential of government communication is frequently overlooked or discredited. Respondents cited that they frequently lack access to and influence in critical conversations that shape strategy and policy. They feel they are brought in at the wrong stage of policy development and delivery. As a result, respondents believe they struggle to deliver integrated communication, politicians fail to see the benefit of it, and government leaders insufficiently finance it (because they perceive communication as an expense rather than an investment).

The research reveals a number of possible explanations for this lack of influence including:

- **Skill sets:** are government communicators equipped to participate in strategic and complex discussions? Only one in three respondents agree that senior management sufficiently understands social and digital marketing.

- **Awareness:** do other professions within government recognise the breadth of specialisms that exist within communication? Thirty-five percent of respondents said that a lack of awareness of communication within their organisation inhibits performance.

- **Structures:** does the communication function operate effectively across government silos? A third of respondents are frustrated by their organisation’s hierarchy and lack of collaboration.

- **Impact:** is the impact of government communication adequately evaluated? Sixty percent of respondents evaluate their performance against communication outcomes rather than policy outcomes.
Overwhelmingly, participants in this research believe they operate in outdated hierarchies and overly-bureaucratic processes. They cite a lack of risk taking and agility in wider government as limiting their freedom to innovate and improve.

Question. Respondents asked to rank their functions on a scale between opposing cultural attributes:

At a leadership level, 39% of leaders say they do not report into sufficiently senior levels within government. As a result, they are unable to drive a strategic communication agenda within the highest echelons of government. They find it difficult to initiate reform. They also struggle to act as trusted advisors. Indeed, a number of respondents feel they are actively distrusted by ministers and senior officials on the grounds that they engage with the media – despite this being a key tenet of their role. This is particularly the case amongst low performing communication functions where one in four respondents identified a lack of credibility within their own organisation as a key challenge to effective communication.
What can be done?
The research suggests three key areas for improvement for senior government communicators:

- The ability to demonstrate the impact of what they do
- The ability to act as influential experts within their organisations
- The ability to help governments deliver effective public policy

Successfully demonstrating impact depends on having the right:

- Objectives or performance indicators: 40% of respondents say communication is evaluated against communication objectives (such as reach and awareness) and not policy objectives (such as impact, influence and effect)
- Partners: our research suggests that higher-performing communication functions work in partnership with policy teams to develop objectives that are bespoke to each project, and written into strategic briefs at the outset and assessed continuously rather than solely at the end
- Skills and tools: the higher-performing teams include research and data specialists and make use of all available data

Somehow we became very expendable. Our influence has to start at the top because, as you know, a lot of difficult conversations need to be had.”
– Communication Leader, Australasia

Communication teams follow instructions instead of working as partners.”
– Communication Leader, South America
We believe that government communication leaders cannot influence effectively without demonstrating how they contribute to the delivery of government policies. Evaluation systems based on logic models can demonstrate the outputs, outcomes and organisational impact of communication. We work to a version of the UK Government Communication Service’s evaluation framework. Few participants in The Leaders’ Report work to such a disciplined model.

Providing evidence of impact however, is only half the solution. What is clear from The Leaders’ Report is that government communication leaders must also improve their own ability to influence. Respondents recognised that they need to play a more decisive role in areas including:

- Managing competing and often contradictory policy issues
- Enabling stronger cross-government collaboration on policy priorities
- Improving co-ordination between individual ministries and government as a whole
- Clarifying the governance and accountability of the communications function
- Overcoming cultural inhibitors such as risk aversion

“We know that the communication industry is very poor at both formative research and evaluation. Therein lies one of the big problems: what they do is creative, very creative... but it is not evidence based and built on data. This is one of the big failings of the communications industry... if you have got enough data you can change even the most hard-headed leader.”

– Communication Academic, Australasia

“To be a good communication leader, you need to be able to describe the end state, what communications can achieve, and that’s improvements in society. You need to be professionally at the top of your game because unless you can demonstrate knowledge of your discipline, you have no licence to operate.”

– Communication Leader, Western Europe

Tools and approaches that can help

We offer a variety of services that help communication leaders influence within and across government. These include:

- Cutting edge data analytics and campaign evaluation
- Efficiency and effectiveness modelling
- Advisory on the digital transformation of public services
Outliers

Our global research found significant agreement among communication leaders and practitioners about the key challenges they face. However, our conversations also identified a range of issues worthy of future study and consideration. They are:

Hyper-personalisation: should government communication always be made-to-measure?
Almost all websites – from search engines to social networks to news outlets – use filters to personalise content: advances in data collection, analytics, digital electronics and digital economics have helped website owners offer better real-time and more prolonged online experiences. But is that necessarily a good thing?

At first glance, filtering offers real benefits for government communicators. We have argued in The Leaders’ Report that personalisation can help governments deliver more relevant messages to citizens and, by limiting information overload, help them find the intelligence they need more easily.

But some respondents to The Leaders’ Report are concerned that if governments over-use personalised content, they may:
- Damage the “bonds of society” by prioritising individual needs and opinions over those of the wider community
- Isolate citizens, by limiting the amount of information that challenges their point of view
- Exclude other unrelated news or information that citizens may find useful.

Some degree of algorithmic personalisation is of course essential: there is simply too much information online for citizens to cope with. But in addition to providing access to information and services, government communicators also have a responsibility to educate and inform citizens about unpopular issues and the needs, views and requirements of the wider population that algorithms may filter out.

Where that delicate balance – between continued personalisation and community-focused content – lies, isn’t yet clear. Government communicators will need to find it, or deal with the consequences.

We have called these issues ‘outliers’ and we intend to initiate wider discussion and debate on them over the coming months.
The 4th industrial revolution: will populism go mainstream?
The Leader’s Report has already looked at how, worldwide, growing numbers of people feel disconnected from society. But how will they react when the next technological breakthroughs are also social ones? When jobs are automated and where Tesla drives your taxi and drones deliver to your door. Today’s populist dislike for immigration may become tomorrow’s distrust of technology.

There is increasing consensus that the world is on the brink of a technological revolution that has the potential to:

- Disrupt lives, transform professions, and discard skills on an unprecedented scale
- Transform how we live, work and communicate

So how can government communication ensure that changes to society, including increased automation of jobs, do not lead to conflict, strife and extremism?

Participants in The Leaders’ Report don’t yet know how they will respond. The risk is that without genuine engagement, support and communication, communities will fracture further into those who thrive and those who struggle to survive. If we’re to prevent today’s populist tensions becoming tomorrow’s mainstream ones, government communicators must:

- Anticipate and understand the way society, technology and the labour market are all changing, and provide productive guidance to politicians and policymakers
- Find alternative ways to engage with citizens that do not depend on traditional labour market segmentations
- Enable citizens to have a genuine voice in societal developments that may impact them – at least in the short term – negatively
- Ensure public support and public services are accessible to those who are in greatest need of them
Confidence in democracy: how can we reassure the insecure?

Many respondents to The Leaders’ Report highlighted the challenge of communicating with populations that are increasingly fearful: we used the term the age of insecurity to describe the current state of a wide range of countries where citizens feel increasing and acute concerns for their economic, political, religious and physical security.

Some communication leaders in western democracies report that this insecurity has led to a devaluation of democratic liberties in return for greater perceived safety. So how can government communication best reassure citizens who feel increasingly insecure?

Government communicators need to understand that:

- Citizens interpret messages differently in emotionally-charged situations. So how is government communication reflecting citizen concerns? Do government communicators have a strong enough understanding of their audiences?
- Data and data privacy will become increasingly important tools to define both segmentation and messages. Communicators must ensure this data is managed effectively and ethically, and incentivise sharing in both the government and public interest
- Consultation and engagement can help reassure citizens of their security. Two-way communication may help maintain confidence in the ability of governments to protect their citizens

New technology: a bridge or a barrier between government and citizen?

New technologies are advancing at an exponential rate. Some – such as artificial intelligence, voice recognition and virtual reality – have the potential to transform the way governments deliver public services. Chatbots could replace government call centres. Supercomputers might help doctors diagnose illnesses. Wearable technology may help patients better manage pain and reduce medication levels.

But for all the benefits these advances will bring, some respondents to The Leaders’ Report express concern that, while technology will clearly disrupt how citizens engage with one another and with government, they want and crave the human touch. If used inappropriately, might technology become a bigger barrier between government and citizen rather than a bridge? Could avatars and virtual reality software entirely replace human-to-human engagement?

Challenges also bring opportunities: wearables, bio measurement and motion detection, for example, are increasingly being used in research to help governments identify key insights into how and why citizens think, act and engage in the ways that they do.

Few government communicators appear to be engaging yet with the private sector, where the use of AI and VR is significantly ahead of the public sector. Early learnings are already there for government communicators to absorb, provided they can find the time – and the networks – to do so.
Findings from The Leaders’ Report show that government communication still has some way to go before it fulfils its potential to be a true strategic delivery partner for government. It highlights ten requirements or attributes of high-performing government communication functions. These are:

**Strategy:**
- Having a clearly defined role of and structure for government communication
- Understanding the wider socio-economic and cultural environment

**People:**
- Creating collaborative team environments
- Sustaining investment in talent, skills and professional development

**Process:**
- Maintaining consistency of messages across government and across channels
- Working across government on communication priorities

**Structure:**
- Maintaining sufficient access to senior stakeholders
- Driving a focus on the citizen throughout the organisation

**Tools:**
- Accessing a wide range of data sources to inform decisions
- Embracing technology to become more citizen focused

The research also identified three typologies that best represent the current performance of government communication functions. These are:

- **Marginalised megaphone.** These teams face serious challenges across all five areas. Broadcast remains the primary form of communication and team skills and structures reflect this. Influence with key decision makers is distant

- **Mind, but not matter.** Most countries covered in The Leaders’ Report fall into this category. Communication leaders realise the need for a marked shift in how they communicate, but struggle to make the necessary improvements in their function

- **Crossing the last frontier.** A small minority of participants demonstrate best practice behaviour across most of the key areas of activity. Complete integration as a fourth lever of government is not complete as they lack sufficient authority, influence and resources to fulfil their potential
Consequently, we were also able to identify a fourth typology – Fit for the future – that we believe summarises the key success factors required for tomorrow’s government communication function. The research suggests several respondents are very close to reaching this highest level of performance, although challenges remain. Nonetheless, we believe the fourth typology is realistic, achievable and necessary if government communication is to fulfil its potential as a lever of government delivery. And while it will require significant structural, cultural, financial and capability change, a failure to adapt will further undermine the status of communication within governments worldwide – and further limit the ability of governments to respond to the needs of their citizens.

Our outliers illustrate just four of the many potential developments that will impact government communication in the coming years. They also illustrate the need for government communication functions to prepare for an uncertain and more challenging future, as well as improving performance today.

This will be no easy task, but government communication is a career chosen by exceptionally educated and motivated public servants and we have spoken with many of them during the course of this research. We believe they are up to this task and to playing an essential role in delivering effective public policy and good governance.

Learn more
The Leaders’ Report is designed to start a discussion on the future of government communication. For further information or analysis please contact theleadersreport@wpp.com.
Case Studies

Trust
Auckland Council New Zealand: Read More
Trust in government structures Netherlands: Read more

Audiences
Audience Segmentation South Africa: Read more
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Capability
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Influence
Be clear on cancer United Kingdom: Read more
Behaviour Change Measurement USA: Read more
Footnotes


3. WEF: [https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/06/10-ways-to-target-violent-extremism/](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/06/10-ways-to-target-violent-extremism/)


5. Ibid.


7. Colin Crouch, Policy Network 2011 “Is there a liberalism beyond social democracy?”


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